

Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Survivor Stories

DONNA

Donna met Troy, her abuser when she was 19 years old. She had the typical romantic courtship like most. At first Troy treated her like a queen, then 6 months into the relationship the abuse began. Embarrassed by the injuries and black eyes, she would hide the abuse with baggy clothes and excessive make-up.

When she was eight months pregnant with her son, Troy asked her to help him rake the lawn. When she voiced that she didn't feel up to it, he hit her in the face with the rake. The abuse continued and got worse as the relationship continued. She was beaten, robbed of her money, and isolated from her friends and family. She always had to tell Troy where she was going and why. On one occasion, she visited her grandmother for lunch, and didn't tell him. He drove by and saw her car and called her outside. He punched her in the mouth and split open her lip. She called the police. An officer came and spoke to her while her mouth was bleeding, but he was not arrested because he fled before the police arrived.

She called the police on several occasions, and only once was Troy arrested for beating her. Finally the police got tired of her calling and threatened to arrest them both if they had to come back. At this point Donna felt that she had no options and had no other recourse.

But then she contacted the domestic violence program. They helped her when no else would. They gave her the resources and support she needed to help keep her and her children safe. They invited her and her children to attend a support group and offered them emergency shelter. They luckily were able to escape the abuse; she and her children have been safe and free from abuse for four years.

SHARLENE

Twelve years ago, Sharlene met William through a mutual friend. After their second child together, things started to change. "He tried to shut me out from the world," Sharlene said as she described the abuse that she endured from William. She enrolled in college but soon encountered problems: her car wouldn't start, or the garage door would be locked, and William would have the opener with him at work. Sharlene began taking the bus and train.

When William's transportation breakdowns failed to stop Sharlene, he took away her cell phone and slyly unplugged the home phone. He made her keep the blinds closed and kept isolated her from her friends and family. Jealous of the attention Sharlene lavished on their children, William would scream at the kids to leave them alone. Before long, the children were afraid to show affection of any kind.

Sharlene dropped first out of school and then out of life. One evening, desperate to talk to her mom, she snuck in the bathroom with William's cell phone. He kicked the door down and punched her in the face in front of the children. When she woke up, he blamed her for making him hit her.

"That was the first and last time my kids would ever see him hit me. This is not how I wanted to live my life. The next day we moved to a shelter," Sharlene related.

Determination and tenacity became second nature to Sharlene. She returned to school, and today Sharlene works as a medication manager and is pursuing her bachelor's degree in public health.

LURENE

One December night, Lurene called the domestic violence crisis line. Frightened for her safety, she and her five-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son needed immediate shelter to escape from her husband's abuse. Lurene confided to the on call advocate, explaining how for years, her husband controlled, harassed and battered her, telling her what clothes to wear, how to style her hair and when to be home.

Because she was "too proud" to tell anyone about the terror in which she lived, Lurene endured years of beatings and sleepless nights when her husband would yell at her for hours at a time, hitting her when she dozed off. Severely sleep deprived, Lurene frequently arrived at work bruised and exhausted, unable to perform her work duties without error. Lurene constantly needed to spend her salary to repair her car, which her husband damaged in many ways, including secretly putting sugar in the gas tank.

One day, Lurene's work supervisor gently expressed her concern about the errors that she was making. Crying, Lurene admitted that her husband had beaten her, and revealed a blackened eye that had become infected from a recent beating. A coworker who volunteered for a domestic violence shelter urged Lurene to reveal her secret and call the crisis line.

Lurene went to the shelter with her two children, Lacey and Damon. They eagerly participated in children's programs. Lacey enjoyed the art projects, videos, and group meetings with other children. Damon liked to be a helper, offering to assist the children's program coordinator with projects. Both children enjoyed the friendships they developed with other children. As Damon told Lurene, "I'm glad we're here, Mommy because I didn't want you to get hurt any more."

Three months later, they moved into their own home, thanks to a local church's generosity. Today, the family is "doing well." Lurene kept her job, and recently received a promotion. Damon and Lacey have adjusted and continue to progress, says Lurene. "I feel that now I can help someone else who is hurting. Without the support of the shelter, I couldn't have done it."

TERRI

Terri and Jim met when she was eighteen. She thought he was a wonderful man. He was one of her bosses from work. They would spend time together just having fun. She seemed important to him; at least she thought she was.

After they were dating for about 2 months, she found out she was pregnant and she did not want any more children. She already had a son, so she told Jim that she wanted to terminate the pregnancy and that is when it all started.

Jim kept her home and fired her from my job. When she said she was leaving him, he hit her across the face. He acted like it was nothing and Terri knew it was wrong but she did as she was told. She was only 18 and he was 31, she thought an older man would be better for her.

The hitting became beatings almost every day. Even though she was pregnant, Jim did not care. He said, "If you were a good girl I wouldn't have to discipline you so much." I hated hearing that. Terri had a daughter and she thought it would help the relationship but it didn't. The beatings continued, the black eyes, split lips and bruised body was all she knew. As she was no longer living near her parents and she was forbidden to have friends, Terri felt increasingly isolated.

Jim always said he was sorry. Terri grew to hate her life, she wanted it to end but she had children whom she dearly loved. The children are what kept her alive. She tried to get help from her family but her dad said, "You made your bed now lay in it!" By that time Terri had four children. She kept thinking, "How am I going to leave with four kids?"

Jim continued to hit her. The days went by and she would get hit because she didn't vacuum first then dust. If the house was not clean enough or there was a fork in the sink, she would get slapped again. He made excuses to hit her. So she bided her time till she could leave.

Terri was planning to leave then she found out she was pregnant again. She was very angry because she had her tubes tied. She was the 1% that could get pregnant. So she stayed until her last child was 1 and a 1/2 then she packed her things and left. With her five children, Terri found assistance at the shelter. Terri was able to get work, and she stayed at the shelter for four months until she could secure housing for herself and her children. Terri reports that life is a day to day struggle but still far better than being abused every day.

STATEMENT OF KRISTEN LUDWIKOW

I have been asked to discuss my personal experience with domestic violence and how it not only affected me, but how I felt the "system" was either a hindrance or a help. I would like to open by stating the obvious, no woman, man, child or beloved pet, family member or personal property should be the object of discontent for any "abuser". If I reflect on my personal experience I can tell you that I was not raised in a home that violence was allowed, I did not witness a violent attack nor was I ever abused as a minor. It was not until I found myself at the age of 22 in a relationship with an abusive partner. Of course in my life I had small to even large disagreements with partners, perhaps a strong shoulder brush through a doorway to leave a room or conversation but never a hailed attempt to inflict harm upon me or the ones I loved. So as I expound on my circumstances I feel it is best that you have a glimpse of my youth, teen years and then years in which I succumbed to being a victim of domestic violence and finally a survivor.

My childhood begins in a middle class European American family. We were a small, young family with my father and his parents only arriving here in 1953. There were a total of 15 at the time my abuse started with only 8 paternal relatives and 7 maternal relatives that were alive. So one can imagine that a close knit family and the dream to have a family was a part of who I was. My mother's family Irish Swedes were also close knit and loyal to a fault. My mother and father found one another in middle school walked to school each day then to high school which led to courtship, through the Vietnam War and as most "boomers" they started a family close to their graduation from high school as they were destined to do. My sister 5 years older than me, then along came me, my father worked in the family business, my mother a perfect housewife and mother. We grew up in a loving, kind, endearing home. I went to summer camp, traveled with my family across the USA to see our great country while all along we grew in spirit and memory as the family I loved. As the times changed so did my family, my mother sought a divorce from my father. At that time, for "women of the 80's" you may remember, it was trendy to do so, most women remained in their homes with the children while husbands paid alimony and forged new lives with weekend visits. This would turn out to be an event that was fated.

My teen years were juggled between the peer pressures that are known, the lack of daily maternal influence, since we lived with my father, and an older sister that was desperately trying to avoid "babysitting" me. That "babysitting" led me to socialize with 5+ year older "peers" and in turn it socially matured me faster than would be beneficial for me, furthermore leading me to a non collegiate life that I often regretted and wished I had done differently. This change then led me into a relationship with what would seem grounding, but in fact was life changing. I met my abuser, he was in uniform, filled the bill perfectly to help me gain what I had lost. He was confident, loyal, arrogant, kind, sweet, handsome and a litany of other qualities. What I did not know was that he was a pattern abuser an alcoholic as well as a manipulative pathological liar. After knowing him, I often stated he "could sell a blind woman sight."

In the time I would begin this relationship, which started with a push, then a shove, maybe a broken chair, or perhaps a thrown ashtray, I had slowly become distinctly lost, never a place I had been or was even aware that existed, as police reports surfaced I'd begun to disappoint my family, had become a mother of my son, and subsequently my father passed away at age 49 no longer there for me as a protector. The fate of my growing up with him and choosing to live with him could not be fully appreciated or understood, as I was in the storm and had no compass to find my way home, it was gone with him, and I was alone.

Herein lies the crux of domestic violence as I see it. We are everyone you see each day; normal, wealthy, poor, middle class, abused as children, not abused as children victims. We are loyal, and perhaps lack the confidence to say once is too many times, we are shamed by the way the court system views us as victims that are an equal to the abuser. We are unaware of the meaning of "relief from abuse" yet are asked to explore the idea openly in a court of law with no support a few feet from the abuser. The questions asked don't have uniform answers, the family and victim services create a illusion of fear for the abuser, and security for the victim, yet the restraining order is a piece of paper worth violating time and time again while abuser's return after "getting bonded" out.

The Department of Child and Family Services treat victims of domestic violence as an example to what NOT to ever be involved in. I once had a case worker rub a fingertip over a picture frame

to determine cleanliness in my visibly clean and organized home. When I asked the caseworker what was DCF going to do to insure my son's safety so that I would not be held in negligent abuse, he simply stated "that the abuser" was not caring for my son or a resident at the address of the incident so that was not a point of interest! He stated that I could be abused anywhere and held responsible if my son was with me. Where was I to go? My family had been threatened, friends stalked outside their home to be warned about helping me, companion animals abused in my presence and absence and while they were commercially kennelled there were multiple attempts for them to be extracted by my abuser. Through victim services, I was referred to the Prudence Crandall Center, and they were able to help me develop a safety plan for my son and me. Most importantly they helped me realize I was not alone. I did learn how to set all the cards in place, packing supplies for the ones I loved. With each time I would need to or planned a departure from my abuser I was deterred by him either holding an animal or even my son "hostage" in exchange for my willingness to stay.

I underwent several bruises, fractured teeth, and concussions in my plight to protect the ones I loved, time and time again, returning to court seeking relief from abuse, and having him bond out to visit me again. The animals were my "emotional safe haven" as they were the only ones that loved me as I saw, unconditionally. It was my responsibility to protect them as well as my son, why I had included them in my safety plan and refused to leave them behind.

My son was exposed to violence, at a young age, but studies show that any age is influential in many aspects. He remembers some blurry memories, but knows now his father is ill and he is apart from him, for his safety. His name has been changed, my abuser never followed through with the restrictions I was able to set in the court. My abuser was never rehabilitated, actually went on to more violence and incarcerations even after he was incarcerated from our events. I later heard that a girlfriend tried to stab or actually did stab him, and that she too had a child in the home. Violence begets violence, shame and tattered lives.

It was only through using the system and educating myself about the lingo, that would provide circumstances for my abuser to meet and being savvy enough to understand that he couldn't unless he was truly rehabilitated that I was able to get away. I placed physical distance between

us, moved to a town with low instances of domestic violence, therefore giving me a proactive victim friendly police force, also learning to heal. As I stated earlier, the dogs gave me unconditional love, what I needed was unconditional love for myself, stop feeling like a victim and realizing IT WAS NOT MY FAULT! I had to start wanting the life I HAD instead of wishing it was different and all the terrible shame and pain had not been brought upon me. It was the many events in my life until that point that I found and used the strength I learned and was given either by choice or experience. The dogs let me burrow my head and fill their furry necks with tears, and my heart and mind was able to heal. I still worry about my abuser, being out there, I look over my shoulder, and own two very loyal dogs now that I feel are a safety measure as an early warning system. To survive an experience be it good or bad, you must truly live it, accept it and learn from it. Without these components no victim can become a survivor, they stay trapped in a place they have learned is safe as dangerous as it is!